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U.S. Says Blast Hit Soviet Arms Base

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WASHINGTON, June 22 — United States officials said today that a huge explosion about a month ago destroyed large stocks of ammunition for the Soviet northern fleet at a supply depot at Severomorsk, on the Barents Sea north of Murmansk. Between 200 and 300 people were reported killed.

The officials declined to give details. But other sources suggested that the Central Intelligence Agency learned of the accident from travelers, then positioned satellites and electronic devices to assess the damage.

Those sources said the death toll was estimated at between 200 and 300 people, many of them ordnance technicians sent into the fire caused by the explosion in a desperate but unsuccessful effort to defuse or disassemble the munitions before they exploded in a chain reaction over several hours.

Officials at the State and Defense Departments, as well as diplomats and Congressional officials, all blamed the accident on Soviet "carelessness."

Long-Term Effect Doubted

But most officials doubted the explosion would have a long-term effect on Soviet naval readiness since ammunition could be unloaded from ships in port and loaded onto those going to sea, brought up from reserve stocks, or made by the large Soviet weapons industry.

The site of the explosion was said to be a naval ammunition depot in Severomorsk, a town on the eastern shore of a long bay leading to Murmansk, a large port city on the Kola Peninsula. Other Soviet fleets are based in the Baltic and Black Seas and on the Pacific coast.

The installations at Severomorsk were said to be extensive, with warehouses for storage and plants for disassembling and maintaining ammunition. Severomorsk is listed in Jane's Fighting Ships as a main base and headquarters for the northern fleet.

In most navies, ammunition depots are situated well away from shipyards and bases, as well as population centers. The proximity of the Severomorsk ammunition depot to shipyards or anchorages could not be determined immediately.

No Evidence of Nuclear Weapons

Some sources speculated that nuclear weapons might have been stored there as the Soviet Union draws less distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons than does the United States. So far, however, there has been no evidence of nuclear explosion or radiation.

How the explosion was set off could



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Between 200 and 300 people were reported killed in explosion at an arms depot at Severomorsk.

not be determined. Officials said they surmised there was an accident in handling ammunition or in maintaining it. "They don't have a very good record in handling explosives," said a Congressional official.

A European diplomat with knowledge of Soviet matters said: "Our experience is that they are very careless, in general. They have a problem with a large degree of sloppiness."

Whatever exploded first, the sources said, set off a chain reaction of fire and further explosions. As the fire spread, Soviet authorities dispatched firefighters and ordnance technicians to battle the flames and to try to prevent more explosions by defusing ammunition or moving it.

Many Technicians Killed

Evidently that effort failed as many of the technicians were said to have been killed when the ammunition on which they were working blew up in their faces. That in turn set off more explosions that could not be contained.

Given the vast supplies of ammunition estimated to be in Soviet stockpiles and the productive capacity of the Soviet weapons industry, some officials speculated that the loss of the technicians might be the most severe damage suffered in the disaster.

Officials said the Soviet Navy could also "crossdeck" ammunition, a naval term meaning that ships coming into port would load their ammunition and missiles onto ships leaving port for a deployment at sea. That is commonplace in the United States Navy where ammunition supplies have been short for several years.

In all, the explosions and fires apparently lasted for several hours, although exactly how long could not be determined. Whether the explosions took place during the day or at night was also not known.

But officials here, having had a month to analyze reports of the accident, suggested it would cramp the Soviet Navy only briefly. "They've had worse tragedies," said one official.

Survivors Talked to Travelers

Informed sources said survivors of the disaster evidently talked about it later and their accounts reached West European travelers in the Soviet Union. When the travelers returned to Western Europe, C.I.A. agents picked up the accounts.

In addition, Norway and Sweden were said to have monitored the explosions with their own technical devices. It was not known whether they shared that information with the C.I.A.

Later, the sources said, the C.I.A. asked the Air Force to position a reconnaissance satellite over the site of the disaster to take photographs. Photo interpreters could then render some assessment of the damage done.

Officials and other sources, citing instances of Soviet military carelessness, said a cruiser was sunk in the Black Sea about 10 years ago when ammunition in the ship's magazine exploded. In 1960 senior officers of the rocket forces were killed when a missile exploded on the launching pad.

Soviet submarines have often been in trouble at sea, with one reported having been lost in the northern Pacific about a year ago. Another Soviet submarine rising to the surface hit the United States carrier Kitty Hawk in the Sea of Japan recently. American naval officers blamed the incident on poor seamanship.

In the city of Sverdlovsk in the central Soviet Union, a deadly anthrax agent was accidentally released in 1979 from a biological warfare research center, infecting about 3,000 people.